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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ROME 001279

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IT](#)
SUBJECT: ITALY: FALL REGIONAL ELECTIONS A TEST FOR
OPPOSITION RESILIENCE

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Classified By: POL/MIL Counselor Liam Wasley for Reasons 1.4 (B) and
(D)

Summary
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¶1. (C) Two elections in the coming weeks will be the first opportunity for the electorate to speak since the center-right's resounding victory in April. Provincial elections in Trentino (October 26) could go either way, but given the center left's traditional strength in the province, a center right win would further bolster center right strength after its big win in the April national elections. The center right is expected to win regional elections in Abruzzo (November 30) after a kickback scandal involving the former center-left regional president, but the ability of the main opposition Democratic Party (PD) to ally with smaller partners in Abruzzo, will be a bellwether of PD's ability to seriously challenge the center right in European Parliament elections in May or June 2009. End summary.

Trentino: PD Defeat Could Reverberate Nationally
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¶2. (C) After PD's national defeat in April, party strategists said the PD needed to do better in rich northern provinces like Trentino to become competitive nationwide. Center left leaders have spoken often about building a grassroots movement, and the center left is well rooted in Trentino. However, it is combating national trends, including increasing sourness with PD leader Walter Veltroni and the spreading strength of the center-right Northern League, which expanded its electorate significantly in Trentino in the April national elections. Should the center left lose, the national media will mark the defeat as yet another stain on Veltroni's record, and a further decline in the center-left's competitiveness.

Abruzzo: The Center of the Storm between Di Pietro and PD
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¶3. (C) Abruzzo is generally a closely divided region, but the center right has the edge in this election following the resignation of the center left regional president after being implicated in a corruption scandal. Nationally, PD has struggled to build a united opposition with smaller opposition parties Union of the Center (UDC) and Italy of Values (IDV). The election in Abruzzo is regarded as a test case as to whether Veltroni can build a broad, competitive opposition. Thus far it has not been pretty. IDV leader and former anti-corruption magistrate Antonio Di Pietro has launched withering attacks on both Berlusconi and Veltroni as he seeks to build his party by cannibalizing votes from the PD. The prefect in Abruzzo's capital Aurelio Cozzani told us

that the Abruzzo election is a tailor-made opportunity for Di Pietro because of the strong feelings against traditional politicians among Abruzzese, who feel they have been misgoverned for years. Veltroni is trying to force Di Pietro back into the fold, or--failing that--diminish his appeal by demonstrating that he is weakening the center left to Berlusconi's benefit.

14. (C) UDC is also relatively strong in the region, but the combative relations between IDV and UDC nationally based on personalities, ideology, and history are amplified in Abruzzo, and almost certainly exclude the possibility of a broad consensus on the center left in Abruzzo, probably the only chance for the center left to win there--and nationwide. In Abruzzo, PD is in the uncomfortable position of having to choose IDV or UDC and alienate the other party. National and local officials tell us that they regard the election as a trial run for alliance formation before the European elections.

15. (C) The center right's likely victory has intensified its squabbling over candidate selection. Berlusconi and other top officials from his People of Liberty (PdL) party met multiple times before choosing Gianni Chiodi, mayor of Teramo. Abruzzo contacts told us he is a good choice because he has a strong local reputation, has not been involved in national politics, and is neither tied to Forza Italia (FI) nor National Alliance (AN), thus sidestepping the internal battle in PdL between these two constituent parties. PdL's ability to keep the infighting over candidate selection in Abruzzo and Trentino out of the papers shows its internal discipline and the control Berlusconi has over the party.

Comment

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16. (C) Pundits are watching these contests for the first indicators of whether the center left is bouncing back or if Berlusconi's center-right alliance will proceed from strength to strength. PD contacts downplay the importance of these elections as they brace for the potential of two defeats, which would highlight the opposition's disorder, and further minimize its influence. Two defeats would also mark another missed opportunity for Veltroni to reinforce his faltering position, but would not signal an imminent change of PD leadership. End comment.

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